

Future Nature Culture at Rhôd May 2013.

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Moral dilemma's have always characterised human indecision, but the increased number of recent publications concerned with morality (Moral Blindness by Zygmunt Bauman, 2013 and Artificial Hells by Claire Bishop, 2012 being just two examples), are indicative of a growing awareness that we still have a sense of what is right, but no longer know how to achieve it. With less and less autonomy in our day-to-day lives, we have become more and more indecisive, and as a paradoxical consequence, we crave ever more certainty.

Artists, Guattari (2008) recently argued, are transversal because they are used to living with uncertainty. This offers potential psychological or personal transformation. Uncertainty motivates an artist's creativity and the acceptance of uncertainty can draw our attention to the possible benefits and the real disasters that genuine change can induce.

This is one of the reasons why, David Napier (1992 : xxii) has suggested, creative people are more prone to experiencing moments of existential crisis or anxiety. These responses, he argues, are sensible reactions to our present "insensible age".

To label someone as 'depressed' for example, often represents a disconnection between a symptom and the framework or system of existence that such a symptom might be responding to. Business, Geraldine Finn (1992) argues, is consequently booming in the 'psyche' departments, and will continue to remain that way, as long as we continue to confuse ourselves, and our world, with empiric categories.

The artists in Future Nature Culture, curated by Sara Rees for Rhôd's annual exhibition, have created an exhibition of collective resingularisation¹ that attempts to

¹ Embedded in Guattari's Ecosophy is the notion of collective resingularisation, which protects one from experiencing or enduring the full extent of what Guattari calls the 'existential territories' under which we currently are required to live. Sub-cultures and underground counter-culture movements all help to limit the demands of existential territories, but they are also constantly threatened by and vulnerable to being transformed into consumer cultures. That is why they must constantly reconfigure themselves. Reconfiguration is central to Ecosophy because it prevents people from becoming united under an archaic unequivocal ideology such as "the defence of the father land of socialism" (2008 :23). The aim of Ecosophy therefore is to connect human praxis in its most varied domains. It is a paradox in as much as it values the multi-faceted nature of subjectivity yet simultaneously stresses the importance of collectivity.

highlight the importance of alternative perspectives, so that we might finally recognise how complicit we have become in constructing our own demise.

Rhôd takes place every May at Melin Glonc/New Mill, Drefelin, Carmarthenshire. This is an area where small alternative communities cluster close to the rain soaked edge lands of valleys or stone and moss strewn roads. This is a place where cultural idiosyncrasies are protected from dilution through participatory and collaborative creative practices, where the landscape of indigenous thought is still very much alive.

The artists selected to exhibit responded to an Open Submission Call from Rees, a refreshing development for Rhôd, where their previous curatorial approach tended to include work by members or by artists invited by members. Opening the space for a broader spectrum of artists mitigates against what Elif Shafak (2010) calls the “dangers of communities of the like-minded.”

Assembled together under the dappled light of Melin Glonc garden the artists selected by Rees disclose a disturbing truth: we are looking at something that is about to be rendered marginal, yet simultaneously fights to be recognised.

This notion is most powerfully conveyed in Fern Thomas’ ‘When The Birds Have Gone’ (2013), a work that consists of a small wooden stand of the type so often seen at conference centres or the corners of supermarket isles in the garden of Melin Glonc. The stand is festooned with bird feeding fat balls and seed containers and a small information booklet informs viewers that the wild birds enjoying the sudden abundant array of treats are not in fact real birds, but an imagined prognosis of a probable future, when birds become mechanised versions of birds common to us today. The work serves as a powerful reminder that extinction cannot be reversed and that we are looking at a future where nature has been turned into replica of itself, merely for our entertainment.

This work sets up a poetic dialogue with ‘The Catapult Tree’ (2013) by Johana Hartwig which emphasises, using strips of discarded plastic bags and hazard warning tape the extent to which we carve and recarve the earth in order to suit our own needs. Our ignorance of nature’s mute suffering is a theme that runs through much of the other works in the show.

Long ago, ecological dangers were often physically uncontrollable but always confined to the local, never fully challenging the whole of life as it existed, never extending to the ubiquitous scope of the ecological disaster we face today. Guattari defines this current threat as an “ecological disequilibrium” (2008 :1) and argues that we need to bring together the philosophies of the environment, of social relations and of human subjectivity under one united but simultaneously shifting term² in order to address and articulate it.

Both Thomas and Hartwig present the futility of thinking that this current threat will pass. The Institute for Imagined Futures & Unknown Lands is a vision of our inevitable future, the Silent Spring of which Rachel Carson once forewarned.

Jonathan Bordo (1992 :165) once argued that the primary task of contemporary technology is to organize an effective screen of denial. In order to address ecological damage, technological representation itself must first be penetrated, because technology has a habit of creating an alternative representation of its actual reality.

Sean Vicary and Steve Knight’s ‘Viruscatcher’ (2013) challenges the screen of denial technology presents us with using an ipad, which, when held up to the pond in the centre of the garden at Melin Glonc, activates an augmented reality image of an ‘antibody’ made up of pebbles, leaves and Caddis Fly larvae. The imagined antibody is ‘a counter-desecration’ (Macfarlane, 2011 : 107) proposal to the systematic use of insecticides such as neonicotinoids. The analogous use of the term virus in the title of this work is important because neonicotinoids adapt to their surroundings like a mask and only come alive when “worn” by a cell. ‘Viruscatcher’ becomes, in a sense, the “product” of the artist’s consciousness: alerting us to the dangers of considering ourselves as separate from the rest of nature.

For the archaic, the agent of disaster was a person, whereas today it is for us, a thing. Someone, not something is the toxin, but because our post-secular society no longer has a theosophical basis for punishment, we have, as a consequence absolved ourselves. This is the ‘Moral Blindness’ Bauman (2013) speaks of, and is continues the prevailing perception that we no longer see ourselves as being part of

² Guattari contextualizes our current ecological disequilibrium as paradoxical in as much as we have the capacity to solve it on the one hand through the development of new technological means. However on the other hand we suffer an “inability of organized social forces and constituted subjective formations to take hold of these resources in order to make them work.” (2008: 22)

a broader biosphere.

Napier argues that ritual is one possible way of restoring this disconnection because it tells us something about how transformations can be dynamically negotiated at the peripheries of what can be known about “self” rather than only telling us about how the assumptions of who we are, and our expectations about what will happen, can be preserved.

Ritual therefore becomes the major vehicle for addressing social and individual diseases. With this concept in mind it becomes all the more poignant to witness Johana Hartwig ‘Slit / What’s up flour?’ (2013) as a ritual come undone. Presented in a slit underneath the floorboards of the mill, Hartwig’s video of a hand drawing circles in flour is played in reverse. Oscillating between representation and abstraction, the film records the disappearance of strangely familiar patterns. The image dissolves and re-emerges seamlessly creating a visceral representation of our futile attempts to grasp the remains of ancient wisdom on the precipice of decay.

Heidegger pleaded that the immediacies of material connection with this world should not be forgotten, because people make sense of the whole through their surroundings and their emotional responses.³ Yet as Heidegger predicted, most people tend to immerse themselves in daily life in order to forget the big and more difficult questions surrounding the raw facts of existence. Perhaps this is because we perpetually desire the single instant in our current digital age and as a consequence we have schooled the mind in false priority, making us ever more absent from life, fostering an “emptiness that haunts the heart.” (O’ Donoghue, 2003 : 37).

Rawley Clay’s ‘Granny’s Bench’ (1910 – 2013) is one of the few works in this show that attempt to rekindle that connection with nature, that emotional awareness of being, rather than emphasising how severed we have become from it. Clay placed a metal bench, which belonged to his grandmother in the middle of a stream that surrounds the mill. He sensitively extended the arched back and arms of the bench

³ O’Donoghue asks if our emotional responses to a place might also exist in reverse. He asks why it never occurs to us to wonder how the earth sees us: “Is it not possible that a place could have huge affection for those who dwell there? Could it be possible that a landscape might have a deep friendship with you? That it could sense your presence and feel the care you extend towards it? Perhaps each day our lives undertake unknown tasks on behalf of the silent mind and vast soul of nature. During its millions of years of presence perhaps it is also waiting for us, for our eyes and our words. Each of us is a secret envoi of the earth. (Donoghue, 2003: 43)

so that they continued in unfolding metal waves up stream. Viewers were invited to sit on the bench and feel the flow of water, which had descended from further up the valley, run between their toes. Although this work fostered participation in nature, it was far from cosy. Sitting on the bench was a very uncomfortable experience, reminding us that nature is not there for our amusement. The icy water interrupted any idea of folly, and returned us to the humbling realization that almost all of the work in the show attempts in a subtle and tacit way to help us recognise that the material experience of the material world always exceeds every consciousness we have of it and any and every organising structure we impose on it.

This notion is echoed in Guattari's 'Ecosophy,' which puts forward a mode of existence where currently prevalent frames of reference disappear and where we can be swept away by a 'becoming other' as we transcend all known Enlightenment-inspired and Integrated World Capitalist based systems and structures.⁴

In a recent interview on BBC Radio 3, Alain de Botton suggested that we have forgotten the deeper mission of art. We have forgotten to recognise that it is the only thing between us, and certain kinds of disaster.

Future Nature Culture reminds us of Art's original function. It reminds us that Art can be so much more than the fashionable production of sanctioned professionals. It can have a curatorial approach that is empathetic. Artists accumulate the small fragile social occasions needed to bind fugitive communities together. Art exists, therefore, in order to provide us with the tools for living and dying, and the artists at Melin Glouc garden urge us to recognise our proximity to death, before it will be too late.

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⁴ Guattari cites mass media and telematics standardization, the conformism of fashion, the manipulation of opinion by advertising, surveys etc. as examples of Integrated World Capitalism. (2008: 24).

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